

IREC's recommendations on conducting online/phone survey during COVID-19

International Livestock Research Institute

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Available at <https://www.ilri.org/research/compliance>

Some general principles for phone/online surveys:

- The general ethical principles that govern how we conduct research among communities still apply. We should not lower our standards. Kindly refer to these interesting blogs with ideas on issues to reflect on when designing your research in times of COVID-19, including considerations on your phone-surveys:
 - [Practical tips for implementing remote surveys in the time of the Great Lockdown](#)
 - [Hold'em or fold'em: When a crisis hits, what should I do with my ongoing field research project?](#)
 - [Mobile Phone Surveys for Understanding COVID-19 Impacts: Part I Sampling and Mode](#)
 - <https://www.3ieimpact.org/blogs/phone-surveys-developing-countries-need-abundance-caution> (this one specifically on the ethics)
 - <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/blog/3-20-20/best-practices-conducting-phone-surveys> (webinar from J-Pal)
 - <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cIGjGABB2h2qbduTgfqribHmog9B6P0NvMgVuiHZCl8/edit?ts=5e88ae0a> (doing field work in a pandemic)
- As you develop your research protocol, and complete the appropriate IREC form (see figure 1), these are some of the aspects that need to be carefully considered:
 - Informed consent: as per usual practice, it should be explicitly obtained using a standard script and consent obtained and documented (as much as possible) from all participants. It should be brief, given the vehicle of administration, but cover the usual principles that offer respect and protect confidentiality. You can find example consent forms in [examples IC forms](#).
 - Duration of surveys: answering questions over the phone can be uncomfortable and tiring, which is further exacerbated in cases where respondents may be going through hardship or difficult times. It is expected phone surveys will have a short duration, and scientists must provide a justification for the proposed duration and how they will minimize fatigue and disturbance. In both phone and online surveys, our target participants may be personally or professionally affected by the current situation and we should try to minimize the time we deviate their attention from other important responsibilities (e.g. caring for a sick person, working on a response to the epidemic); try to keep your survey to the minimum required length and consider making arrangement for participants to be able to complete the questionnaire at different times (e.g. able to save their responses throughout the questionnaire and come back to it

when possible; throughout a phone survey check every so-often if the call can continue or stop and resume at another time, etc).

- Confidentiality: appropriate systems for protecting participants' personal information must be in place. Carefully consider things such as: what identifying information is necessary to document (e.g. names, telephone numbers, etc.), how data will be securely stored if collected by home-based staff using their own personal devices, how data will be safely transferred to the research team and/or to central data storage.
- Compensation: offering compensation to participants for, say, their time is usually not recommended as it can act as an encouragement to participate in a survey they may otherwise not be willing to participate in. However, we acknowledge different forms of compensation to participants for their time are used, on occasion, during field work. If necessary, this could be done in the form of airtime for participants. Any form of compensation needs to be adequately justified in the IREC form. A plan on how the project will ensure timely disbursement of such compensation to participants should also be clearly explained in the IREC form.
- Number of participants: online and phone surveys are known to often suffer from low response rates. The number of participants can therefore compromise the ability of a survey to support the study objectives. A justified sample size is, as always, required; this relates to the number of completed interviews/questionnaires we aim at achieving. Note that this is different from the number of calls initiated in a phone survey or the number of 'adverts' made for online surveys as these will likely be much higher e.g. to account for no-answer / completion, no-consent, requires a call back etc.
- Selection of participants and selection bias: As with field surveys your application should describe from which population you will select your respondents (e.g. from a current beneficiary list, facebook group members etc.) and how. It would be good to recognize in the IREC application form and study protocol that there may be inherent biases in the analyzable data for both phone and online surveys (e.g. certain people may not have access to phone / internet, they may not be literate to complete online surveys etc.) that cannot be addressed at analysis stage.

Figure 1. IREC application processes (all forms can be found at <https://www.ilri.org/research/compliance>)

